Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's National Initiative on Workplace Flexibility

Kathleen Christensen, Ph.D.

Director, Workplace, Workforce and Working Families Program

The Workplace, Workforce and Working Families Program at the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation was started in 1994. Its initial goal was to conduct basic research on working families at all stages of their lives. Many of Sloan's research investigations have revealed a profound mismatch between the needs and priorities of working families and the way that work is organized into full-time, full-year arrangements, often with few or no opportunities for time off. While the demographics of the American work force have changed dramatically over the last thirty years, the American workplace is organized in very much the same way it was when the work force consisted almost entirely of men providing most of the financial support to their families. It is not surprising, therefore, that our research shows that significant percentages of working Americans, at all stages of their lives, want more flexibility at work.

To that end, in 2003, the Sloan Foundation launched the **National Workplace Flexibility Initiative** which is a collaborative effort designed to make workplace flexibility the standard of the American workplace. In an effort to reach that goal, the Foundation funds a variety of projects at the national, state and local levels that coordinate with business, labor, government and advocacy groups to advance flexible work arrangements. Each project is driven by a common set of principles: workplace flexibility requires both voluntary employer and employee action as well as public policy reform; change must take place at the federal, state and local levels; the outcome of workplace flexibility must be proportionately fair to employees and employers; and successful flexibility efforts need to take into account the changing needs of individuals throughout the course of their professional and personal lives and across different income levels.

One area of special interest to Sloan is workplace flexibility as it relates to older workers, many of whom are expressing a desire to work past traditional retirement age. For a large percentage of those workers, flexibility would provide the answer to extending their careers while also allowing them to attend their many demands outside of work. However, due to a combination of cumbersome labor laws and antiquated business practices, many hurdles remain in the path of those older workers seeking flexibility at work. The recently supported Center on Older Workers and Flexible Work Options at Boston College will be addressing these issues.

Through grants to *Workplace Flexibility 2010* at Georgetown University Law Center, *When Work Works at the Family and Work Institute*, The Sloan Network for Work and Family Research at Boston College, as well as to The BOLD Initiative, and Corporate Voices for Working Families and CLASP, and a number of other organizations, the Foundation is supporting the change processes that will be necessary to create more flexible workplaces over the long term.

Over the last 11 years, the Foundation has funded six **Centers on Working Families**, one **Workplace Center**, and one **Center on Older Workers**, in addition to nearly 200 other research projects that have examined issues faced by working families. By providing the only source of sustained funding for researchers in sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science, labor economics and industrial relations to conduct interdisciplinary research on issues faced by working families, the Sloan Foundation has played a vital role in developing this new field of work-family scholarship and laying the groundwork for a more flexible workplace.

For More Information

For further information about the Sloan Foundation's Program on Workplace, Workforce and Working Families under whose umbrella the National Initiative on Workplace Flexibility has been launched, see:

http://www.sloan.org/programs/stndrd_dualcareer.shtml